

Sadly, the disaster in the Gulf continues this week as BP's efforts at containment keep hitting snags and residents along the coast scramble to clean up and defend their shores and wildlife. Many have criticized the federal government in the past weeks for not doing enough. The reality is there is only so much government can do to help, yet a lot they can do to prolong the problem and misdirect the pain. For example, in the interest of "doing something" the administration has enacted a unilateral ban on offshore drilling. This is counterproductive. I am proud to cosponsor legislation to lift that ban. Why punish other oil companies and their hard-working employees who had nothing to do with this disaster, and who have better safety records?

And, as usually happens after disasters, countless people – even officials in local and state government - have come forward who know what needs to be done and are willing to help, but have been stymied by federal bureaucratic red tape as the oil continues to gush. The real problem is not so much a lack of government assistance, but government getting in the way of those who have solutions. We witnessed the same phenomenon during hurricanes Katrina and Ike. It seems government's main role in these situations is to find excuses to stall relief, hold meetings and press conferences, waste money, punish the wrong people, and over-regulate.

Yet even after many examples of past incompetence, people still look to government to solve problems in the wake of disasters. A government that tries to be all things to all people might engender a lot of learned dependence, but ultimately it only harms the very people it is supposed to serve as they wait helplessly for salvation from Washington.

Government could help by holding the appropriate parties fully liable for damages and clean-up costs. I am hopeful that efforts to do this are genuine and BP is indeed held responsible for all damages, not shielded by liability caps or reimbursed under the table by taxpayers. Unfortunately, a large sum of taxpayer money has been slipped into the upcoming supplemental bill for Gulf cleanup costs that should fall on BP. Taxpayers should not have to bail out a major oil company that has caused this horrible damage to our shores.

It should be noted that BP is not exactly a bastion of free market capitalism. Rather, they are very vested in acquiring government subsidies, favorably slanted policies, and

competition-hobbling regulation. BP has even been a major lobbying proponent of cap-and-trade because of certain provisions in the legislation it could profit from. Considering who lobbies for them and what they lobby for, my concern is that attempts to hold them strictly and fully accountable could end up being nothing more than a shell game, with taxpayers ultimately holding the bag.

If the government's idea of action in crisis is to punish the innocent, bail out the guilty, and raise prices at the pump on everybody, we should want them to do less, not more. Recent polls show sharply waning support for offshore drilling. We still need oil, and a lot of good jobs depend on oil production. It is crucial to the functioning of our economy. But if accidents continue to be handled this way, it is easy to understand why so many see more cost than benefit to off-shore drilling, and that is also a tragedy.